People's Global Action's infopoint newsletter

What is People's Global Action?

A historical perspective on PGA in Europe

You may have heard the name People's Global Action, but you may not quite know what political dynamic and what groups it includes. So here is a quick flashback, in light of the preparation of PGA Europe's Belgrade conference, scheduled for summer 2004, and also to help further develop structures for communication and exchange among anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist movements. This text focuses on introducing PGA Europe, but occasionally extends to cover the general history and worldwide process. The acronym PGAe in this text refers to "PGA in Europe". Needless to say, this text does not purport to establish any kind of orthodoxy, neither regarding the history of PGAe nor regarding its political goals. No one is empowered to act as a PGAe spokesperson. No one can represent PGAe. The comments outlined below should therefore be seen as one point of view among many, and a partial one at that. It is the point of view of a handful of committed individuals engaged in the broad, complex and fascinating process that is PGAe.

From the Earliest Days to Counter-summits

In the wake of the Zapatista insurrection in January 1994, in Mexico, a number of encounters took place. Among these were the famous "Intergalactic Encounters against Neo-Liberalism and in favour of Humanity", held first in the Chiapas and subsequently in the spanish state. The political context was glum. The Wall had just fallen and free-market capitalism was - however briefly - triumphant. The indigenous peoples of the Zapatista movement had created a shock of hope. It ran round the world.

It was in the aftermath of these encounters that the idea of a worldwide network for coordination and information exchange among activists first arose in theoretical discussion - and then in practice. One early goal was to attack the World Trade Organization. The First Worldwide "People's Global Action against WTO and free trade" conference took place in Geneva, in February 1998. Several hundred representatives of people's movements from around the world gathered. They managed to agree on a political manifesto (1). Amongst the participants were Canadian Postal Workers, Earth First ecologists, French farmers and anti-nuclear campaigners, Maori, U'wa and Ogoni people, Korean trades' unionists, North American native women's organizations, radical Ukrainian eco-people, and peasant movements from all continents. Their manifesto covered such issues as the use of direct action as a means of political struggle; the establishment of an organisational principles based on decentralisation and autonomy; and building direct democracy alternatives. This entire structure was to be moved forward by 12 different groups, called "convenors", distributed regionally throughout the planet.

Convenors

Convenors are collectives acting as contact, information, and coordination points. They co-organise global and regional conferences and used to put out the calls for Global Days of decentralised Action (GDA), notably on the occasion of WTO summits. In the first convenors' committee there were 3 from Latin America, 1 from western europe, 1 from Eastern Europe and 2 from Asia. At the time of writing, there are sometimes several convenors per region, especially in Latin America. Convenors share their workload with other collectives. The earliest European convenors were "Reclaim the Streets", a group with its roots in radical ecology and road protests that had helped renew anti-capitalist direct action techniques, notably through the use of street parties as blockades and by establishing connections with workers' organisations such as the Liverpool dockers or London Underground workers. In Asia, convenership work has been done by organisations like KRRS, an Indian farmers' union with a membership of several million, best-known for setting fire to Monsanto GM crop fields, and the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements, a national platform of grassroots movements from the whole country (which includes Narmada Bachao Andolan, the National Fisherfolk Forum, the Union of Landless Labourers of Andhra Pradesh, etc). The current Asian convenor is the Krishok Federation (the landless or otherwise marginalised peasant movement) from Bangladesh. In Latin America, PGA has gathered very diverse cultures and backgrounds, from CONFEUNASCC, a small-scale farmers' union in ecuador, Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna, the Bolivian cocalero movement in Chapare, to the Colombian Process of Black Communities.

And so resistance became as global as capital

In May 1998, the first fruits of PGA were seen in four days of worldwide resistance against the G8 summit in Great Britain and the WTO summit in Geneva, which was the second Ministerial Conference since the creation of the WTO, and a celebration of 50 years of GATT and post-World-War-II capitalist world order. This was the first of a long series of counter-summits. It included some of the hottest protests that Geneva had ever seen and in Birmingham participants in the G8 summit were forced to stage a secret evasion to escape a newly occupied city. Meanwhile, some 200,000 Indian farmers demonstrated to demand that the WTO be dissolved.

In those days, the dynamic remained locally-based. PGA-initiated Global Days of Action were decentralized events. One of the most impressive was J18, on June 18th 1999, an anti-capitalist day to correspond with the G8 summit in Cologne. Actions were organized in 72 different locations, including the arrival in Cologne of the Inter-Continental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance (formed by grassroots groups from India and other Southern countries) and a festive occupation of the City of London which ended with the financial centre being ransacked by a few thousand demonstrators. During this period, the expression "anti-capitalist" made a massive return both among militants and in the media. The slogan "Capital is global, the struggle is global" was put into practice.

In Seattle, in November 1999, the closure of the ministerial conference of the WTO showed the effectiveness of combining the many different direct actions - sometimes highly coordinated, like the blockades of all the streets leading to the summit - that were organized by small affinity groups. There were solidarity actions

in more than 70 countries. The so-called "Battle of Seattle" which had radicals at its forefront, was nonetheless quickly exploited by traditional leftist citizen reform groups and non-governmental organizations (NGO's), which sought to use it as a "creation myth" for their new strategies of power-sharing among trade bodies and "civil society." In September 2000, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank summit in Prague, Czech Republic, was PGAe's chance to see how well actions using a diversity of tactics, such as street parties - dancing and mobile confrontation (the pink line), sabotage (the blue line) and confrontational civil disobedience (the yellow line), could complement each other. There was also a multitude of preparatory initiatives, such as the "caravan against capitalism," a roving series of actions in French-speaking parts of Europe, initiated by the Reseau Sans Titre (the Untitled Network).

The counter-summits and global protests rapidly transformed into occasions for mass convergences of activists from all over, and these convergences have continued to this day, despite the precedent set by the ominous repression during the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy. Today's counter-summits bring together a spectrum of groups, political parties, and "civil society" NGO's that is much broader than just the ensemble of groups involved with PGA. Indeed, it is often forgotten that the original impetus behind these counter-summits came from radical groups opposed to lobbying and who denounce the welfare-state and parlementary "democracy" as much as (neoliberal) capitalism.

PGA hallmarks

The purpose of PGA exchanges and the PGA network is to connect local groups that agree with the PGA's hallmarks:

★ A very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism; all trade agreements, institutions and governments that promote destructive globalisation.

★ We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds. We embrace the full dignity of all human beings.

★ A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organisations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker.

★ A call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements' struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples' rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism.

★ An organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy.

PGA is a tool for coordination, not an organization. PGA has no members and does not have and will not have a juridical personnality. Nor organisation or person represents PGA.

Political developments and other forms of action

Apart from mass events, the frequency of which is determined big capitalist institutions' calendars, PGA has also been responsible for the development of other processes, that are sometimes less well-known. The Intercontinental Caravan enabled some 400 members of Indian farmers' organizations and some 50 members of other "third world" people's movements to come to Europe and demonstrate outside major institutions such as the WTO, the IMF, the OECD, NATO and so on, as well as outside multinational companies' European headquarters.

They destroyed GM crop fields and a state research laboratory. Crucially, the caravan enabled these "third world" groups to build bridges with a variety of European movements.

PGA-inspired Global Days of Action provided a context within which to develop creative forms of direct action, even for quite small collectives. Thus, street parties, blockages, occupations, anti-capitalist carnivals and so on. The very decentralization and proliferation of contacts between various groups led to the establishment of participative outward communication tools such as Indymedia (There are currently more than 130 separate Independent Media Centers, IMC's, throughout the world, with many more sub-collectives within IMC's as well as "rogue" IMC's operating independently from the network; Indymedia has been called "the largest all-volunteer organization in the world."). Other internal tools such as PGA's internal lists were developed, providing a noticeboard for actions and analyses round the world.

In July 2002, the international no-border camp in Strasbourg, France, marked a coming-together of PGAe's various organizational modes and approaches to anti-capitalism, as well as practical actions centered on the theme of immigration and confrontational border-camping practices that are particular to the international No Border network. The result was the next (shaky) step in the evolving practices of self-management and autonomous living, direct democracy, and decentralized actions, involving 2,000 people over a period of 9 days. This experience would provide a base of experience that helped to launch the other camps and similar "autonomous villages" that proliferated during the anti-G8 demonstrations in May and June 2003, in France and Switzerland.

PGA's Second Global Conference took place in Bangalore, India in August 1999. On this occasion, the network proclaimed its intention of going beyond "free exchange" of ideas and information, to promote a generalized attack on capitalism and other forms of domination such as sexism and racism. A decision was reached to clearly identify the differences between PGA and other anti-globalization groups whose ideas are fundamentally opposed to ours such as, extreme right-wing groups, political parties and reformist NGOs. PGA's 3rd Global Conference took place in Cochabamba in Bolivia. It stressed the importance of local and regional processes. Despite these positive developments and after several years of - perhaps too frenetic - activism, a number of criticisms of the organizational modes and political goals of PGA were expressed with increasing force. PGAe's European conference at Leiden in August 2002 aimed to confront these criticisms and act on them.

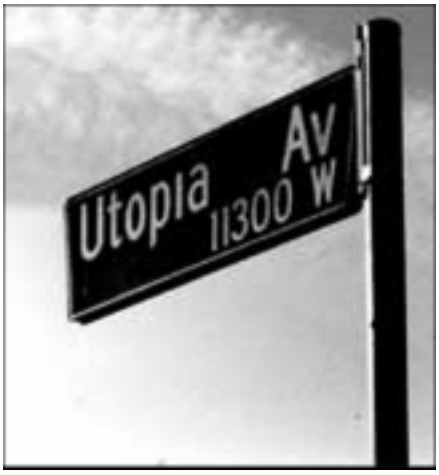
PGAe's 2nd Conference

The first European PGA conference took place in the year 2000 in Milan, Italy, and was hosted by the Italian "Ya Basta!" movement for civil and social disobedience. The second took place in September, 2002, in the small city of Leiden, Netherlands, and was hosted by EuroDusnie, an anarchist collective, which was a European co-convener with the Catalan Movimiento de Resistencia Global (Global Resistance Movement). Lots of people from across Europe converged to share analyses and discussions; at least 650 were officially signed up, and many more just attended. One of the main points of a conference like this was simply to facilitate face-to-face encounters and to bring to light, even in the eyes of the participants themselves, the existence of a common movement and a common state of mind. The conference was also an opportunity to bring about a common understanding of the forces and struggles represented there, to consider questions the movement faces in common, and then to move forward with concrete proposals in response to the question, "What now?"

Our Dutch hosts had put in place an organizational structure aimed at ensuring the participation of all those present. All participants were invited to get involved in the cooking and cleaning; preparing and moderating meetings, workshops and discussions; creating a daily newsletter summarizing the outcomes of the discussions and debates. Help was also provided with transport, particularly for groups from beyond the European Union's Eastern border, by means of a redistribution of Western Europeans' registration fees.

The question of who might be admitted to the conference was raised, bearing in mind that the purpose of PGA exchanges and the PGA network is to connect local groups recognizing the founding hallmarks.

There was no strict mode of selection, though registration did include a request for reasons for participating. People were actively encourage to prepare for the conference at a local level. Discussion days were seriously hard work. They mainly took the form of small discussion groups on all the many themes suggested by participants, but also on general strategic questions relevant to the movement as a whole and working groups of PGAe organizational structures. The issue of how discussion should be conducted and how decisions should be reached was the subject of lively debate, with a view to encouraging egalitarian participation and counteracting power-plays. Techniques used include facilitation, hand-signals, small groups, progressive consensus and so on.



The tyranny of having no (formal) structure

The balance between formal and informal, in the ways that PGAe works as a network, was another main focus of the structure debates. PGAe has a strong preference for organic and affinity-based relationships. But it became equally apparent that the lack of clarity as to "who takes care of what" makes the distribution of responsibility overly fluid and makes it unclear exactly how and where decisions are made and makes it difficult for new people to integrate. This in turn leads to informal hierarchies which are particularly hard to read because they are invisible. The challenge is therefore to make it more explicit how the structure works, without rigidity and without falling back into the bureaucratic and authoritarian structures that we have been reflexively conditioned to expect. (2)
Finally, the work on the PGAe structures (mailing lists, web-sites, information relay systems, contact lists, and conference organization) should be done in a much more formal and open way... so as to invite many more people to get involved. Faced with the absence of new conveners and the need to clarify the work to be done on the network structures, a new working-group meeting for PGAe was held at the Tanneries, an autonomous self-managed space at Dijon in France in March 2003. It was at this meeting that DSM, a Belgrade-based anti-capitalist group, offered to act as convenors.
Detailed summaries of discussions and decisions made about PGAe process in Leiden (3), which were completed in Dijon (4) , are available on the web. They are based on the organizational principles of PGA, which were affirmed at Cochabamba. (5)

The info points...

To move PGAe forward on a large scale and to promote it on a local basis, the Leiden conference decided to set up several "info points," a series of local groups that are involved in PGAe. Each "info point" group is responsible for spreading information about the conferences, history and projects of the PGA network to people who are interested. These info points are not "members" of PGA, because PGA has no membership, but they do work to make this network more visible, an important task, considering that the network does not speak as a whole or as an organization. You can find a contact list for these info points on the 'net. (6)

European Convenors and Process Group

The role of European convenors was defined at Leiden as organizers of the European conference, responsible for making the network visible and dynamic, as well as maintaining its infrastructures (web site, newsgroups, contact lists) and contacts with the rest of the planet. At Dijon, it was decided that these tasks could be shared amongst different collectives interested in committing to PGA and its structures (with particular reference to infopoints). These collectives constitute the process group.
One of the most powerful tools of the network is the PGA web-site (6), which compiles a large number of historic texts, announcements, action reports and reports from PGA conferences. Another tool being developed is the web site https://global.so36.net, a thematically-structured global archive project, a forum in which to publish articles on themes and actions.
Three mailing lists have been created as communication tools for PGAe...
pga_europe_process list is a forum that all of the collectives involved in the PGAe structures and decision-making processes (conferences, lists, web-sites, info points, etc.) should subscribe to. **pga_europe_resistance** list is for announcements of and reports from events and actions. The **pga_europe_discussion** list is for basic texts and debates. To subscribe to these lists, go to the webform. (7)

The sustained campaigns...

In Leiden, thematic working groups were set up, based on PGA principles. One was on water, and another was on creating alternative forums ("hub" projects) during the various social forums. Since Dijon, there has been a specific working-group dynamic focussed on gender.

Finally, what is PGA? A Network? A Coordination? An Exchange?

These discussions posed the question of the possibilities and limits to a network that claims to be based on decentralization and autonomy, which has no official membership, offices, or bank accounts, a network without spokespersons, where nobody speaks in the name of the network or makes decisions on its behalf. The debate on the role of PGAe has continued since Leiden and Dijon, and is still far from being resolved. For some, the crucial point is that, in contrast to political parties and other coordination structures, PGA should not aim to

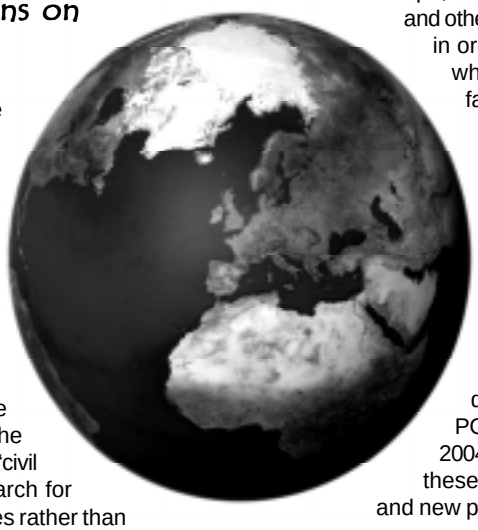
launch action campaigns in its own name, even though the encounters between groups, communication structures, and contact networks that it offers have been able to greatly facilitate the establishment of concrete common initiatives, even recently such as the global day of action in December 2002 in solidarity with Argentina's popular uprising or some of the anti-G8 blockades and events in 2003.
This doesn't mean that PGA conferences, convenors, or simply groups in the network can't take the initiative of launching propositions or campaigns to the whole network. On the contrary, the originality and dynamism of PGA is that - thanks to a minimal agreement on goals and means of action and coordinated autonomy - it is a network capable of inspiring action. (In practice, the origin of propositions have been quite decentralised. The calls for action during Seattle or Prague for example where first made by local groups there, and picked up after by the convenors.) In contrast to traditional organisations, not only propositions can come from anywhere, but there is also no effort to make the actions appear as an international action of PGA. The action is that of the organisations that take it up, acting locally in their own name. For this reason the network as such goes relatively unnoticed, which does not make it necessarily less efficient than a traditional kind of organisation. It is certainly not PGAe's goal tomake consensual decisions on global strategy for world revolution. Apart from the hallmarks and manifesto, PGA groups can disagree on all kinds of things (particular forms of action or going to Social Forums, for instance) without having to split or argue endlessly. Thus some groups can try a political hypothesis and come back to discuss it after. For some, PGAe shouldn't officially decide anything but its own structure and the manner in which to set up gatherings, lists, web sites, and other means of communication. To people of this opinion, PGAe is basically a means of exchange between various groups who share a commitment to its principles. There is considerable potential here, since it enables regional and global moments of coordination; it provides a means of getting to know each other, of contrasting our various approaches to political theories and struggles, of sharing ideas for action, contacts and resources, of providing ourselves with quality time to judge the success of our actions and to engage in thematic analysis. Despite this emphasis on decentralized and autonomous action, others also feel that, PGAe ought also to be able to regularly find ways to put forward campaigns and coordinated days of action, in its own name. The issue remains under discussion.

Other debates in progress within PGAe:

Breaking out of the activist ghetto...

The question of how to open up our groups and networks, which can sometimes ossify into closed tribes, rigid in our identity politics, has many facets. How do we break out of the "ghetto" of hard-line activists who are totally sure of the truth of their mission and the justness of their means, without diluting the radical hopes of our struggles and practices? By casting an analytical eye to the makeup of our meetings, in Europe at least, we can see that they are primarily made up of activist "specialists," between 20 and 30 years old (even if there are a few grey heads here and there) and a hegemony of middle-class white folks. These observations reveal the lack of ties to other categories of people, notably immigrants and undocumented migrants, but also more generally the working class. This contradiction is problematic for our struggles, in Europe at least, within a network that calls itself "People's Global Action" .(8)

Overview of the reflections on strategy...



There were several themes of the discussions and political campaigns opened up during the Leiden conference. However, a few major questions focussed the debates. Here is an overview. The counter-summits and global summit protests, which since 1998 have made up a common playing-field for the movement, have since Spring 2000 been the object of various criticisms: the trap of the spiral of repression, the lack of focus on local struggles, the exploitation of the movement by leftist "civil society" and reform groups, the search for unitary consensus among the masses rather than fundamental analysis, our loss of the element of surprise, the loss of our choice over the place and time of our actions, and the lack of the constant renewal that is necessary to keep our actions effective. Since Seattle, some activists have argued that we ought to leave the the counter-summits to the unions and the NGO's. Many people who have experience with concrete direct action want to redevelop the element of surprise, using other forms of action and in territories that are less fenced in by the forces of repression. Others say, this is all true, but can we simply abandon the terrain to the cops and reformists, when we know that this huge magnet which we have created is still drawing thousands of people, many of whom are basically looking for us and not for reformist bla-bla. And how can we say that we want to break out of the ghetto and talk with all kinds of people, but not want to talk with people from the base of ATTAC, for example, or other people who come ? The debate continues...

It was also said it was no longer enough to identify the enemy as being mainly made up of bigmultinational corporations and financial institutions. We should refocus our critic of the state and social control. as well as of all forms of domination within human relationships (including consumerism, sexism, racism, discrimination on the basis of sexuality, and other systems of oppression), and of the ways that these systems of domination are integrated in our own realities, in our daily lives and at the various scales of social interaction in which we play a part. By varying our tactics and our fields of discourse, by staying inventive and unpredictable, we can still shake our contemporaries out of their resignation and alienation. People spoke of developing structures to support autonomous communities and self-sufficiency, silly actions and public art, street assemblies, sporadic or permanent caravans, action camps, occupations or new international days of action at places and times of our choosing.

The importance of experiments in self-management, of squats and other zones of temporary autonomy, currently under threat in Europe, were stressed. Various forms of camouflage and other anti-repression techniques were suggested in order to avoid the pigeon-holes (or cages) in which they are attempting to contain us, with false claims of terrorism.

Without media stars, experts, or professional theoreticians, PGA is moving forward, thanks to the multiple gifts brought to the network by the creativity of individuals, with the goal of creating common frameworks for collective action, among those who have no desire to be recognized within the Left of political parties and institutional labor unions, with their long line of hierarchical and dogmatic organizations.

PGAe's Belgrade Conference, in the summer of 2004, will provide another opportunity of continuing these debates, as well as discovering new faces and new projects.

Notes:

(1) http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/en/pgainfos/manifest.htm
(2) Tyranny of structurelessness by jo freeman
(3) http://www.pgaconference.org/_postconference_/pp_plenarydecision.htm#P3
(4) http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/dijon/report.htm
(5) http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/cocha/principles.htm
(6) http://www.agp.org/
(7) http://www.pgaconference.org/_postconference_/mailform_1.htm
(8) For a detailed analysis of racism within PGA, see the People's Global Radio interview with Maria Teresa Santana, at https://global.so36.net/2002/09/377.html

The PGAe infopoint near you:

CALLING ALL GRASSROOTS, ANTI-CAPITALIST MOVEMENTS, GROUPS AND COLLECTIVES.....

The 3rd European conference of the Peoples' Global Action (PGA) network: from the 23rd until the 29th of July 2004 in Serbia, Post-Yugoslavia. More info at: pgaeuconfcontact@riseup.net

http://www.pgaconference.org